

ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK ON EARLY ISLAM

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IDENTITY AND SOCIAL FORMATION IN THE EARLY CALIPHATE

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The study of communal identities in the early Muslim-era Middle East is perhaps the most direct pathway into the heart of pressing questions about the rise of Islam. Identity and community reflect the fundamental ways in which people express who they think they are, and in times of seismic political, doctrinal, and cultural changes, such as the shaping of the Caliphate following the Muslim Conquests, the ways in which groups organised themselves and articulated their characteristics are key barometers by which historians can track the practical everyday significance and effects of the wars and statecraft detailed in chronicles. Identity speaks to the culture and personal impact of Islam's development, the soft factors of people's quotidian lives underlying the economy and power politics of more traditional historiography. The purported march of Islam from the mid-seventh century onwards can be substantiated once we understand how and the extent to which it changed Middle Eastern society, but the analysis needs to proceed cautiously, as there are substantial challenges to navigate.

The first challenge is identifying the actual groups whom we seek to study. Traditional historiography presents early Islam as a world filled with Arabs, Persians, Copts, Berbers, Muslims, Jews, Christians, and a host of other emotive and potent labels for different kinds of communities. These labels are still used to define groups today, and most of these current peoples marshal memories of early Islam in order to explain their identities and their interrelations. As a practical matter, therefore, identities and their respective views on early Islamic history are politicised, sensitive and contested, and studies and opinions are laden with agendas, both patent and latent. Readers can review past scholarship and discern how colonialism, Orientalism, Arab nationalism, other nationalisms, political Islam, and apprehensions about Islam each exerted different pressures on the ways in which the histories of Middle Eastern populations have been written and their identities imagined. When seeking to understand how social groups operated in early Islam, our first port of call is thus to question ourselves to see if we are exporting present concerns to the past, if we are reconstructing historical groups as a reflection of today's populations, and if we are accordingly misconstruing early Islamic identity and social formation.

In the search for a better perspective, modern theoretical work in anthropology and memory studies offers some relief by proposing new ways of thinking about identity with the potential

to change the field by recalibrating what we mean by "social groups." The familiar names of "Arabs," "Persians," "Copts," "Jews," etc. were long marshalled in exclusive terms to create taxonomies demarcating races and nations, but anthropologists have undermined the fixedness of race as a matter of theory and demonstrated that identities are, at least to a substantial extent, intellectual constructs, and that much invention of tradition leads to their creation.¹ An ethnicity is not defined by DNA particular to one set of interrelated peoples; rather it is the common set of ideas shared between a group of individuals from time to time that enables them to perceive unity, and, consequently, the boundaries between "Arabs," "Persians," and others were not necessarily so rigid as formerly imagined. Pushing further, memory studies theorists are now stressing that memory is pluriform and "transcultural" too, and so they also doubt that there can be any purely "national memory" as the exclusive property of one group.² Memories seem to be freely shared, collective memory is mutable and mobile, and hence multiple groups can borrow from the same array of memories to articulate their identities. Groups are more inter-related than hitherto imagined, and cannot be conceptualised as occupying unique "containers" (Welsch 1999).

Accordingly, it is facile to assume that a given group can be studied in isolation, or to imagine that any one group possesses perfect internal cohesion axiomatically distinguishing it from its neighbours. People always organise themselves into collectives, but that is perhaps the only constant: the lines between groups are fuzzy and the practical ramifications of social divisions are not fixed. As a consequence, it is unhelpful to think of the Middle East in early Islam as a world divided between readily distinguishable communities separated by impermeable battle-lines: instead it seems more reasoned to interpret the process of Conquest and Caliphal development as inaugurating a fertile period when everyone had opportunities to rethink who they thought they were, and in so doing, created powerful ideas and ethnic categories that remain vibrant and important to the present day.

This chapter examines identity in the early Caliphate by first exploring theory in a little more detail to articulate what we mean by "social group," "ethnicity," and "ethnogenesis." Second, we investigate early Arabic literature's own terminology for describing social groups. The terminology reveals the conceptual categories early Muslims themselves used to imagine identities, and helps us interpret the contemporary sources about the Caliphate's social composition. In our final two sections we undertake the historical survey of social formation, employing a long view of Middle Eastern societal development from the century before the Conquests and across the Caliphate's first 150 years.

Social groups and ethnogenesis

"Social group" can refer to a veritable myriad array of categories into which a population can be subdivided. People may be classified by religion, place of origin, place of domicile, language, class, profession, among other factors, and there is often substantial overlap of the traits marshalled to define who someone "is" and how he relates to others. The importance of social groups lies in the enduring value people attach to the binary relationship of "self" and "other": we constantly interact with people and want to know who is "like us," and who is "outside," and the boundaries drawn between groups who recognise mutual differences constitute the divisions between people and regulate the social relationships which essentially make life work and history happen.

From the perspective of historical anthropology, ethnicity (sometimes called *ethnos*) is a key form of identity that connotes the very broad senses of shared community between individuals who consider themselves to be one "people."³ The theoretical basis of ethnic theory springs

from Max Weber's celebrated 1922 essay, published posthumously, which rejected the paradigm of "race" and its implied objective fixedness of communal identity via bloodlines (1996).⁴ Weber proposed instead that an "ethnicity" is subjective because the passage of time and experience of events change people's impressions of who they think they are, prompting them into new groupings (1996: 35).⁵ Kinship is accordingly symbolic, not biological: belief in shared ancestry between members of a group is imagined as a result of history's vicissitudes, a consequence of collective action, not its cause.

History's vicissitudes are, of course, diverse: ethnic groups develop along sundry trajectories, and so there is no uniform touchstone defining an ethnos. Scholarship instead classifies a group as an ethnos where it exhibits at least several of an array of basic "ethnic" traits that include (1) a proper name expressing its identity, (2) a myth of common ancestry, (3) shared historical memories, (4) a link with territory, (5) elements of common culture, and (6) a sense of solidarity (Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 6–7). Historians also note that the criteria are not fixed: the matrix of ideas that constitute an ethnic identity change as the group's circumstances change, and novel circumstances can nurture brand new communities. Scholars thus speak of "ethnogenesis," the process by which ethnic identities form and evolve over time, and many theories treat the history of a social group as the tale of a tradition and its evolving significations, thus making the historian's task one of unpicking the traditions' layers to show the dynamics of how historical events prompted groups to manipulate their identities.⁶

Models of ethnogenesis prompt students of the early Caliphate's social history to scour the sources, listening to how individuals identified themselves, articulated their senses of community and changed the region's social map over time. Theories of constructivism and instrumentalism, following Weber, offer several explanations as to how historical events prompt groups to redefine their senses of community,⁷ and the now large body of theory can be epitomised via the dual phenomena of consciousness and interaction. Ethnicities must be believed to become real, and "it takes two, ethnicity can only happen at the boundary of us" (Wallman 1979: 3). Consciousness of collective unity needs an outsider "other" whose alterity drives "us" to construct our own perceptions of unity, and people become aware of such "others" when undertaking transactions with neighbouring groups. Transactions assign particular roles to different parties (buyers vs. sellers, tax collectors vs. farmers, for example), and if such transactions persist, a stable "boundary" delineated by the different transactional roles can arise between groups (Barth 1969: 15). People perceive the boundaries and thence develop consciousness of "inside" and "outside" – "us" and "them." A functioning sense of ethnic unity could then coalesce on the "inside" if its members share common "cultural stuff" (Barth 1969: 15; Barth 1994: 17–18; Jenkins 2008: 25–27): visible traits and physically performed actions such as language,⁸ religion,⁹ mythology, symbols, dress, and cuisine which distinguish them from those on the "outside" and which enable people to tangibly experience shared identity (Anderson 1991: 15; Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 6–7; Jenkins 2008: 25–27). Once aware of their commonality of interests and culture, people begin articulating the hallmarks of ethnic consciousness, adopting an exclusive name for themselves and generating a unifying set of genealogies and myths of origin to "feel ethnic" and maintain their communal cohesion and socio-political status.

As noted, the ethnic community is somewhat open-ended: once an ethnicity forms, its subsequent history becomes a period of "maintenance and renewal"¹⁰ whereby both continuity and change exert pressures on the shape and meaning of the community. Changing boundaries and new transactional partners alter how a group articulates its identity, and as lifestyles and power relationships change, people will join the community if it is advantageous to do so, and people will cease expressing the identity if it loses its value as an asset in the wider social context. Groups are also subject to assimilation, since a stable and flourishing matrix of transactions

breeds a common social context that can dissolve old consciousness of difference in the interests of mutual cooperation (Epstein 1978: xii; see also Vayda 1994). Ethnic groups thereby acquire new members (who will need to somehow fit themselves into communal genealogies and histories in order to integrate into the “family”), or groups can merge, becoming less dogmatic about old divisions (and new forms of communal history are created in turn).

Whilst circumstances and the whims of human fancy exert significant influence on ethnogenesis, it is material to note that ethnicity has rigidities too. Individuals lack *complete* freedom to construct identities because ethnicity is “real,” it exists in real social/historical contexts and it acquires a tradition constricting the ways it can be re-imagined.¹¹ Groups do not suddenly appear and disappear, but rather evolve slowly in reaction to changing circumstances. Caliphal decree cannot therefore be expected to “invent” identities, but power can bestow advantages to joining a community.¹² This is significant, since people often shop around: an individual usually operates in society with multiple identities, and will articulate or try to assimilate into the most advantageous depending on context. Communities therefore are driven partly by institutions and/or economic forces,¹³ but they are also “crowd-sourced,” as they are populated by myriad individuals who bring individualised conceptions of self to the party. Group identity, especially before the advent of bureaucratic nation states and their potent capacities to drive homogeneous senses of national identity, is thus a most bifurcated idea, powerful and useful, but contested and mutable. It is aligned with political and socio-economic forces, but it has no one controller and so evolves unevenly.

A rich reconstruction of social history that grasps the meanings of “Arab,” “Persian,” and other identities as they were buffered through the varied circumstances and geographies of the early Caliphate thus needs both a long and panoramic view that spans the rise of Islam across the Middle East, and a microscope that peers into particular locales to see how traditions and identities were negotiated by groups and individuals across time and across towns. Students may apprehend that tracing ethnogenesis is a little akin to writing the biography of Tristram Shandy: we must begin long before the beginning, and the many details and relevant considerations long divert us from reaching the end. This is particularly the case for early Islam since discourses of ethnogenesis have only recently been introduced, and the field is in a nascent form. For our survey, we now switch to a second array of key foundational considerations: the conceptual categories which Arabic writers used when writing about social groups. Terminology shapes the way we conceptualise groups (witness, for example, the differing connotations of “race” and “ethnicity”), and thus we ought not take the Arabic terms for granted. Philological enquiry enables us to disengage from our present preconceptions about social groups and perceive what early Muslim-era writers themselves thought the idea of “community” could mean, and how they imagined communal boundaries could be delineated.

Concepts of social organisation in early Islam

Early Arabic literature possessed a rich vocabulary to describe social groups. Although theories of ethnogenesis and today’s Arabic idiom for “identity” (*huwiyya*) are modern, there were many words synonymous with “community,” and the involved commentaries on their meanings in early dictionaries indicate that notions of social identity were important, and much like the open-ended ideas of identity held by theorists today, the variegated Arabic lexicon reveals an intriguing awareness in the early Caliphate of uncertainties involved in defining communal boundaries – or at least the multiplicity of ways communities could be constructed. Here we examine the connotations of fifteen terms commonly encountered in texts describing social groups as defined in the earliest multi-volume Arabic dictionaries: al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad’s (d. 175/

791) *al-'Ayn*,¹⁴ Ibn Durayd's (d. 321/933) *Jamharat al-lughā*, al-Azharī's (d. 370/980) *Tahdhīb al-lughā*, and Ibn Fāris' (d. 395/1004) *Maqāyīs al-lughā*.

As the early Caliphate inherited the intellectual traditions of Late Antiquity where concepts of identity were already well developed, a brief note on pre-Islamic terminologies provides an advantageous backwards look into the legacies which Arabic writers negotiated. Latin described groups as *gens* or *natio*, words connoting "people sharing a single origin" distinguished from other such groups around them.¹⁵ The Latin terms conjure semantic affinity with "begetting" and "birth," bestowing a distinct bloodline/"racial" approach to identity – the early seventh-century CE Iberian commentator Isidore of Seville reflects the typical methodology of dividing the world into kin-groups (2006: 192), each of which had a proprietary language and one progenitor identified from the Bible (Genesis 10 offered the most popular ancestor list).¹⁶ Middle Persian also seems to have embraced a similar notion of kin/race to divide world populations: the word *tōhm* (also attested as *tom*) derived from the meaning of "seed" (Dehkhodā 1998: 6530), and it passed into Near Eastern usage in the Syriac *tūhmā*, used to connote "race, stock, family, lineage, origin" (Payne Smith 1903: 168). To an extent, such terminology suggests that Late Antique communities operated under the racist belief that groups were distinguished by kinship, and that separate lineages gave rise to distinct "nations."

Other words in Late Antique usage, however, suggest alternative paradigms also operated. Greek has *éthnos*: originally a word connoting any "multitude, human, or animal," it developed into the primary term to categorise peoples who were imagined to share a common nature, if not necessarily kinship (see Xenophon 2013: *Oeconomicus* VII 7.27).¹⁷ Greek authors used *éthnos* to identify peoples by the places which they inhabited: each *éthnos* had its particular homeland and cultural stereotypes in Greek writing, particularly opposed to Greek "Hellenes" (Aeschylus 2009 *Persians*: 43, 56; Aristotle 1932: 1324).¹⁸ Perhaps its lack of explicit connotation of blood-ties/kinship enabled the idea of *éthnos* to enter an intriguing transformation in Late Antiquity whereby Greek translations of the Bible used the singular *éthnos* to mean the Jewish people, distinctive through their faith (Lk. 7:5, Jn 9:50–53), and the plural *éthni* to connote unbelievers generally – i.e., a "multitude of heathens" (e.g., Mt. 4:15; Acts 28:28).¹⁹ *Éthni* thus adopted notions of "other" in terms of "heathenness," indicating a role for confessional boundaries to conceptualise populations, and likewise, Syriac writers used the word *ḥanpiā* as a marker of both heathenness and ethnicity (Payne Smith 1903: 149). Paul also summoned *éthni* to label Gentile Christians (Rom. 11:13, 15:27) and to distinguish them from Jewish Christians (Gal. 2:14). The advent of Christianity appears to have oriented the word formerly employed for "nations" distinguished geographically or culturally onto a potential confessional trajectory too.²⁰

When Arabic writers began to record their thoughts on social groups and nations, they introduced a host of new words into the ring. As was the case for a number of technical terms of art, some Hellenistic vocabulary was Arabised – the Arabic *jins* presumably derived from the Latin *gens*, but the ways in which *jins* was interpreted and the new words Arabic writers introduced are significant. For example, the Arabic interpretations of *jins* did not reflect the meanings of "birth" embedded in the Latin, but rather the much broader notion of "similar type" to represent "kinds of things or people" (al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad 1980: VI 55). Arabic *jins* better approximated the original connotation of the Greek *éthnos*, and, according to my readings of pre-modern Arabic, *jins* remained a technical term of categorisation, and not the most common way to refer to peoples of the world. Thus, whereas the nearly contemporary Isidore in Iberia used *gens* to discuss the division of the world into kin-races, and while early Muslims borrowed the same word, they did not import its racial connotations wholesale, and they more often used their own terminology.

Arabic literature has a host of words to connote “groups,” e.g., *jamā’a*, *raḥṭ*, *shī’a* – these connote personal or ad hoc connections to “factions,” “bands,” or “cliques,” and while some, especially *shī’a*, were emotive and developed sectarian connotations, such semantic shifts occurred relatively late (see Hodgson 1955). The words were not the type of broad-based terminology used to delineate and categorise “communities” or “peoples”: for the more weighty social groups, Arabic writers used other terms which can be analysed in two sets – words for “peoples” and words to demarcate tribal divisions.

Terminology for “people”

Alongside *jins*, the Arabic words used to articulate the idea of “peoples” were *ma’shar*, *ahl*, *milla*, *umma*, *jīl*, *sha’b*, and *qawm*. Analysis of the ways in which Arabic lexicographers interpreted the words uncovers two immediate points. First, the terms were all read as connoting large and distinct collectives of world populations. Second, the bases for determining who was “in” the collective were varied. *Ma’shar*, *umma*, *milla*, and *qawm* were described as reflecting people united via collective action or interests (which articulate intriguing foreshadows of Weber) (al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad 1980: I 248, V 231, VIII 324, 427; Ibn Durayd 1987–1988: I 60; al-Azharī 2004: I 369, VII 320, 324, XI 504; Ibn Fāris 2002: IV 324–327); *jīl* and *jins* were used mostly in the more clinical sense of connoting distinct types/groups like the classical Greek *ēthnos* (al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad 1980: VI 55, 179; Ibn Durayd 1987–1988: I 495; al-Azharī 2004: VIII 219, 441; Ibn Fāris 2002: I 476, 499); *sha’b* was defined in terms redolent with genealogy and descent, invoking the notion of peoples “splitting” (*tasha’aba*) from ancient progenitors (*sha’b* is the closest semantic equivalent to Latin *gens*) (al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad 1980: I 263; Ibn Durayd 1987–1988: I 343; al-Azharī 2004: I 394; Ibn Fāris 2002: III 190–191);²¹ *ahl* was said to connote proximity, people “close” to each other, either physically or metaphorically (al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad 1980: IV 89; al-Azharī 2004: V 68; Ibn Fāris 2002: I 150).

Considering the dictionary definitions in the round, the terms had the potential to enable Arabic writers to think about “peoples” in a number of ways. The traditional notion of categorising people in terms of “race” via common descent was facilitated by *sha’b* (and, to a lesser extent, *ahl*), but the array of terms referring to collective action/purpose intersected closely with overt religious tones too. Most of the terms appear in the Qur’ān, and their interpretation was guided by exegetical needs to understand what God intended,²² and moreover, five of the eight “ethnicity” words were marshalled when dividing populations according to faith. (1) *Ma’shar*, connoting the intertwined life that united its members, appears in the formulas *ma’shar al-muslimīn* vs. *ma’shar al-mushrikīn* (the “Muslim people”/“Polytheist people”). (2) *Ahl* implied life, habitation and familiar living, *ahl al-Islām* became another synonym for “Muslim” connoting those united in their proximity to the faith, alongside *ahl al-taqwā* and *ahl al-maghfirā* (the “people of faith” or “the pardoned ones” – in a Late Antique apocalyptic sense, “the elect”)?²³ (al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad 1980: IV: 89)). (3) *Milla* was unambiguously religious, implying the path of commandment, and referenced in the phrase *millat rasūl Allāh* (the people of God’s Messenger) (al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad 1980: VIII: 324; Ibn Durayd 1987–1988: I 168; al-Azharī 2004: XI 291). (4) *Umma* was defined primarily as “a people with one religion,” and also merged faith and lineage in one definition as “a people related to a prophet” (al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad 1980: VIII 427). (5) Some definitions of the technical *jīl* also incorporated reference to faith by the backdoor, defining *jīl* as equivalent to *umma* (al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad 1980: VI 179, VIII 427; Ibn Durayd 1987–1988: I 495; Ibn Fāris 2002: I 499).

As a matter of philology, the Arabic terms for “people” equipped writers to conceptualise the boundaries between communities in terms of race and/or faith, and it is noteworthy that the

express terminology for thinking of people in terms of common ancestry was not dominant. Words related to blood-descent, *nasab* and *nasl* alongside terms derived from “mother,” “father,” or “children” were not employed to describe “races” in the ways *gens* and *natio* operated in Latin imaginations,²⁴ and while some tenth-century writers compiled lists of world peoples by race traced via biblical ancestry from Noah, such efforts were not standardised and there was wide debate even concerning the father of the Arabs.²⁵ *Umma* ostensibly could have derived from Arabic “mother” (*umm*), but the dictionaries insist it relates to the verb “to head for a place” (*amma* – i.e., in this case, people on a common path) or from the idea of leader (*imām*), and while there was debate as to whether or not its members all had to possess common faith, definitions stressed *umma*’s theoretical confessional unity (al-Azharī 2004: XI 504–506).²⁶ Perhaps a borrowing from the confessional notions of the Late Antique *éthni* is operating here, and the extent to which the semantics of thinking about groups along religious lines reflected broader social processes is considered in the next sections.

The dictionaries intriguingly provide no express role for language in defining a people – only the much later Ibn Manẓūr’s (d. 711/1311) *Lisān al-‘arab* accords place for a proprietary language in defining the boundaries of a *jil* (1990: XI 139). And another means of dividing people is evidenced from the terminology’s usage: *ahl*, alongside its faith-infused definitions, was also employed in Arabic literature as the preferred means to group people by their place of origins (or domicile) – i.e., interpreting *ahl* as shared physical proximity (without presumption of kin-interrelation). In sum, and in part aligned with modern theories of ethnicity’s pluriform nature, early Arabic’s vocabulary enabled Muslims to imagine communal boundaries in varied terms, most particularly via common descent, confession, and/or place.

Terminology for tribes

The early dictionaries include seven words applicable to tribal organisation: *qabila*, *banū*, *ḥayy*, *‘imāra*, *‘ashīra*, *baṭn*, and *fakhdh*. The dictionaries restrict these words to discussions about Arabs, implying that early Muslim philologists considered Arabs as a group exceptionally marked by tribal structure.²⁷ The words also have manifest connotations of body and birth: *ḥayy* relates to “life,” *banū* means “sons,” and *baṭn* and *fakhdh* refer to “belly” and “loins,” respectively, demonstrating the corporeal conception of descent and blood-kinship conjured by tribalist terms. In tandem with the proliferation of tribal terminology, early Arabic literature contemporary with the dictionaries produced prodigious tribal genealogical compendiums, such as Ibn al-Kalbī’s (d. 204/819 or 206/821) *Jamharat al-Nasab* and *Nasab Ma’add wa-l-Yaman* and al-Balādhurī’s (d. c. 279/892) *Ansāb al-ashrāf*. Given such apparent attention to tribalism, modern scholars often suggest that Arab community is bounded by a “genealogical imagination,”²⁸ under the proposal that genealogy was the central organising aspect of original Arab identity and communal consciousness in pre-Islamic Arabia (see Khalidi 1994: 5; Rosenthal 1968: 21–22, 99; al-Duri 1987; al-Azmeh 2014: 100, 128). Closer scrutiny of the material, however, reveals complexities that impact the traditional associations of Arab community with tribalism.

In terms of the terminology, it is noteworthy that words’ precise meanings seemed to have been unclear to the early lexicographers. *Qabila* was universally acknowledged as the main word connoting the boundaries of one kin-group from others, but *banū* and *ḥayy* were equally applied to groups that could have been called *qabila* (al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad 1980: III 318, V 167; Ibn Durayd 1987–1988: I 103, 372; al-Azharī 2004: IV 148, VII 168; Ibn Fāris 2002: II 122, V 51). The dictionaries report that Arabs were composed of *ahyā* (the plural of *ḥayy*), but the difference between *qabila* and *ḥayy* is not addressed; al-Marzūqī’s philological discussion of Arabic poetry suggested that *ḥayy* was a synonym for *qabila*, but Ibn Manẓūr’s later dictionary’s

more detailed discussion suggests that *ḥayy* could be both larger and smaller than a *qabīla*, which corresponds to earlier attested usage (al-Marzūqī 1968: II 914; Ibn Manẓūr 1990: XIV 315). Likewise a *banū* could take many forms, from connoting a small clan composed of two or three generations of descendants from one grandfather to massive confederations. To resolve the evident terminological flux, the genealogist Ibn al-Kalbī again features on the scene: he is quoted as sorting the tribal words into a hierarchy of subdivisions from tribe down to immediate clan/family: *qabīla* – ‘*imāra* – *baṭn* – *fakhdh* (cited in al-Azhārī 2004: V 457), but the evidence is not as elegant as his linear model. The dictionaries disagree as to whether *baṭn* indeed connoted a larger group than *fakhdh*, some believe the latter conversely represented major groupings.²⁹ The term ‘*imāra* is also unusual – it appears in a pre-Islamic poem to mean a grouping of tribes, but the poet is obscure as to its technical ambit, and the lexicographers never solved it either.³⁰

Analysis of the genealogical literature and its lists of inter-clan kinship interrelations adds further complication, as it seems probable (or perhaps almost certain) that ‘Abbāsīd-era writers between the late eighth and early tenth centuries invented the genealogical system which organised all major pre-Islamic Arabian groups into one Arab family tree.³¹ The array of kinship terminology implies that many pre-Islamic Arabian groups did conceptualise their communities as tribal kinship groups, but individual groups likely did not believe that they were related to other Arabians, and it is perhaps most accurate to conclude that a plurality of kinship systems with varied terminologies existed in pre-Islamic times,³² and they were then synthesised into one “Arab system” several centuries afterwards by urban ‘Abbāsīd-era writers.

More research into tribalism is needed, but we apprehend a fine balance. Traditional Orientalist impressions that Arabs are fundamentally a “tribal” people are exaggerated, but equally, ‘Abbāsīd-era Muslims did believe that Arabs were a people (*sha’b*) whose organisation into interrelated tribes set them apart from others,³³ so the notion of ‘Arab tribes’ is not purely European construct.³⁴ Pre-Islamic Arabian communities accorded an important role to lineage, but the terminological flux and the strikingly bold simplicity of the family trees offered to us in the later Muslim-era texts suggests much construction, if not outright forcing of varied pre-Islamic and Umayyad traditions into one pan-Arabian Arab mould.

Identity and social formation in Late Antiquity

Heeding the advice of historical anthropology, we need a long view of Middle Eastern social history that starts in Late Antiquity to grasp how the rise of Islam affected communities and identity. Amongst the many debates surrounding Late Antique social formation, we focus here on two major questions: (1) the role of faith in establishing communal boundaries; and (2) the theories of Arab origins.

Faith and community

Morony’s history of Late Antique and early Islamic-era Iraq observed that the rise of Islam accompanied the transformation to a “society composed of religious communities,” which he identified as “the single most important distinction between Muslim and Hellenistic society” (Morony 1984: 277; see also Morony 2012). Morony’s sentiment accords with many reconstructions of the Late Antique Middle East whereby social groups are conceptualised as confessional communities – i.e., where religious conviction constitutes the primary marker for group identity, instead of language, occupation, or geographical location. Herein, Middle Eastern history is distinctly contrasted with European, since Late Antique Europe is conceptualised as the period when Europe’s modern “nations” were born as Germanic groups occupied parcels of

the former Roman Empire and developed distinct ethnic, not confessional identities (since they all eventually embraced Roman Christianity) as Anglo-Saxons, Franks, Lombards, Visigoths, and others.³⁵

The faith-first approach to appraise Late Antique Middle Eastern society has logic. Christianity emerged in the Middle East with a novel egalitarian message of global salvation, but Christianity's signature openness had the ironic result of fragmenting populations along confessional grounds. If people believed there was only one path to salvation, then humanity can be conceptualised in a simple binary division of saved vs. damned, but when multiple notions of how to embrace Christianity arose across the early churches of Egypt and Syria, each different group developed different notions of who could be saved (or what one needed to believe in order to be saved), and sects emerged. Unlike the case of the Hellenistic pantheon where gods were shared and reinterpreted, an early Christian was theologically predisposed to consider his particular sect *the* correct path, which naturally could harden boundaries dividing members of one sect from the rest of the world.

Ecclesiastical writers bolster our impressions that a proliferation of sects following the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE created distinct communal identities, each convinced of their exclusive future salvation. The Council of Chalcedon debated the nature of Christ's divinity, and in its wake, the Byzantine state emerged with its Diophysite Christology (also called Chalcedonian), whereas many Middle Eastern groups disagreed, forming Miophysite churches. In the fifth and sixth centuries these were divided into Egyptian (later called Coptic), West Syrian, East Syrian (later called Nestorian), and Armenian churches along with other Monophysite believers across what is now southern Syria and Jordan. Ostensibly, the churches divide Middle Eastern society, implying that domicile and faith merged to create separate regional confessional identities across the post-Roman East, a sectarian fragmentation, contrasting the post-Roman West's dissolution into separate ethnicities. Violence between different sects is reported, suggesting that the churches were able to mobilise communities and harden senses of communal identity and solidarity. The semantic development of the word *éthnos* to connote confessional identity (discussed in the previous section) accords with such heightened awareness that communal boundaries were forming to ring-fence religious sects.

Ecclesiastical writers, however, may have overstated the rigidity of boundaries between churches. The writers of our sources were students of theology and understood the ramifications of their rarefied Christological debates, enabling them to articulate enmities against "heretics" and "unbelievers" (i.e., members of churches with different theologies). But to what extent did local populations or less-educated clergy removed from major cities or monastic centres of learning interpret the varying Christological options available in the aftermath of Chalcedon? Recent appraisals of the actual strength of confessional boundaries divulge interesting results.

First, the Byzantines do not appear to have embraced a specifically Chalcedonian identity. Constantinople had political power as the imperial centre, and its populations likely identified with Byzantine rule and the Christian emperor before delving into the details of Chalcedonian difference from others. Whilst Byzantine emperors occasionally expended efforts to promote the Chalcedonian Christological creed across the empire,³⁶ peoples associated with the Byzantine state apparatus conceptualised their residence in the imperial homeland and/or their connection to the state's power as a primary source of personal identity and they did not usually express their identity in confessional terms as "Chalcedonians" or "Diophysites" (Price 2010).

Second, the divisions between different Eastern churches may not have been wholly operative before the Islamic period. Notwithstanding outbreaks of inter-sect violence in some locales, Tannous, when tracing the spread of theological manuscripts, reveals much sharing between different sects, and anecdotal evidence also suggests that different sects sometimes (perhaps often)

coexisted within towns and villages (2013: 85–90; 2010). Evidence of syncretism at religious sites further supports the notion that different faith groups were able to cooperate, reducing the presence of boundaries would make different congregations feel independent.³⁷

Third, the ingredients we deem characteristic of an *ethnos* are difficult to discern amongst fifth- and sixth-century sects. The proprietary names that now give them an ethnic feel, Egyptian “Coptic,” East Syriac “Nestorian,” and West Syriac “Syriac,” appear to be later developments. For example, the Nestorians take their name from a church father Nestorius (c. 386–450), but Brock argues convincingly that it is anachronistic to label East Syriac Christians as “Nestorians” before the seventh century (1996). The specific doctrines of Nestorius do not appear to have established the identity of the church’s leaders in the fifth and early sixth centuries, and moreover the East Syrians shared a similar language and beliefs with the West Syrians, and hence the supposed division between the two Syrian churches may have more to do with geopolitics inasmuch as most East Syrians resided in the Sasanian Empire, whereas most West Syrians resided in Byzantium. And as for the West Syrians, the sorts of “national” genealogies, histories and attachment to land common to an *ethnos* became clearly articulated relatively late, i.e., after the rise of Islam (Romeny, Atto, van Ginkel, Immerzeel, and Snelders 2010). It is accordingly facile to generalise that Middle Eastern populations were simply one community of “Christians,” but equally it is premature to assume, *prima facie*, that the different churches were able to exert overwhelming pressure to determine individual identities and divide the Late Antique Middle East’s communal map.

Churches were not society’s only powerful institutions, either. The Sasanian Empire controlled the Tigris and lands to the east, whereas the Byzantine Empire occupied the Euphrates westwards. As pre-modern states, neither empire possessed the bureaucratic apparatuses to actively drive identity articulation like today’s nation state, but the Romans (especially after the edict of Caracalla in 212 CE) made substantial progress in forging attenuated “Roman” identity across their empire. Whether the Byzantines were as successful in the Late Antique Middle East is debated. Fergus Millar argues strongly for the uptake of Greek amongst Levantine populations, which indicates substantial acculturation of the region’s Aramaic speakers towards a melded Hellenistic/Byzantine identity, though a plethora of local languages survived and thrived (2013: 19–62; see also Hoyland 2010). The Levant had sizeable communities of Palestinian Aramaic speakers alongside possible proto-Arabic-speaking communities,³⁸ populations in the northern Fertile Crescent spoke interrelated Syriac Aramaics – many spoke or understood Greek too, and the multi-lingual environment makes it difficult to discern boundaries of clear-cut ethnic groups. Fifth- and sixth-century Syriac speakers, for example, left scant evidence that they believed their language demarcated their *ethnos* (Romeny et al. 2010; Tannous 2010: 213–368), and it is also difficult to extrapolate that Byzantine imperium constructed one enduring and deep-rooted imperial identity.

Senses of Byzantine identity likely did interact with questions of faith given the Byzantine emperor’s claims of sovereignty over all world Christians, and Byzantine emperors enacted some measures aimed at encouraging all Christians to think of themselves as Byzantine subjects within a “Christian commonwealth.”³⁹ Hence Christians in the Sasanian Empire could have sensed potential Byzantine/Christian identity, separating themselves from the Sasanian state, but it remains unclear how the attractiveness of Byzantium’s Christianity influenced actual populations. History records some relevant details evidencing dynamics of confessional politics, for example, when Byzantine emperors made overtures to Christians east of the Tigris, the Sasanian emperor seems to have realised the value in advertising his own pseudo-Christian identity by making offerings to Christian shrines in his territory (Fowden 1999: 128–141). Byzantine and Sasanian political-economic competition in South Arabia

during the mid-sixth century also acquired confessional attributes when shaping alliances. The (Chalcedonian) Byzantines allied with the (Miaphysite) Ethiopic Aksumite kingdom against the Sasanians and pseudo-Jewish monotheists of the South Arabian Ḥimyar kingdom. Though alliances navigated different sects, contemporary sources stress the Byzantine-Aksumite shared Christian-ness, and while political and economic factors played a role in the following decades of South Arabian wars, the confessional difference was an emotive and effective layer in the conflict which is remembered for considerable violence, and even a mass martyrdom in al-Najrān.⁴⁰ Amongst the various interpretations of this fighting, one senses that “Christian commonwealth” was not sufficient to dictate feelings of solidarity amongst co-confessionals, but it was a form of identity around which social boundaries and battle lines could certainly form.

Within the Sasanian Empire, there seems to have been less confessional identity manipulation. Elites constituted a mixture of landowning aristocrats and Zoroastrian priests, and while Zoroastrianism certainly had value in defining elite identity,⁴¹ expressions of civic and aristocratic identities were negotiated around Sasanian ethnic exclusivity as *ērīh*,⁴² and the Sasanian elite groups also divided regionally between dynastic families from Fars (southwest Iran) and Khurasan (northeast Iran).⁴³ Whether or not these combined Sasanian elites, dynasts, and the wider population even felt one ethnic bond as “Persians” has recently been questioned,⁴⁴ and hence the contours of community in pre-Islamic Iran are debated. Subjects of the state may have spoken similar languages and shared the political alignment as being “not Byzantine,” but were populations living far from the Byzantine-Sasanian frontier aware of the political significance of their domicile? The empire’s subjects also comprised of a wide array of religious groups of Zoroastrians, Christians, Mandeans, Buddhists, and Hindus leading to a further “pluralistic” aspect of Sasanian society (Daryae 2010: 97). It may be that the most operative senses of communal belonging were tied to localised landowning aristocratic families who divided the Sasanian realm into discrete estates.⁴⁵

Late Antiquity witnessed the emergence of a similar localised elite-based identity in North Africa via the process of Berber ethnogenesis. Roman decline in the fourth century CE facilitated greater autonomy for local landholding elites in the pre-Sahara, who offered themselves as client-overlords to the Roman administration and competed with each other, creating new alliances with groups in the interior. Vandal conquest of the coast in the fifth century little affected these North African populations: at this time the local groups began to call themselves “Berbers” and recognised a degree of similarity between an array of “Berber” elites across the region, and vigorous and sometimes quite stable Berber kingdoms emerged (Rushworth 2004; Brett and Fentress 1997: 50–80). Berber ethnogenesis may have been more pronounced than pre-Islamic Iranian cohesion: the relatively strongly felt “Berber” ethnicity that is visible in the early Islamic period is strongly rooted in a sense of place, language, and tradition of independence.⁴⁶

In sum, Late Antique Middle Eastern communities negotiated an array of factors related to power, regional interests, and sectarian feeling which could influence their choices for conceptualising social groups. Labelling populations as “Byzantine” and “Sasanian,” or “Nestorian,” and “Coptic” is too one-dimensional and imposes broader communal consciousness than many local populations could have felt. When Muslim armies spread across the Middle East they found multi-linguistic, multi-faith cities and quasi-autonomous parcels of land managed by localised elites. Clergymen had been keen to construct rigid boundaries and make distinct social groups out of their flocks, and imperial administrators had hoped to engrain imperial ideologies and identities, but neither perfected their designs, and the advent of Islam inaugurated new opportunities.

Arabia and "Arabs"

What was the identity of those Muslim armies who entered the ethnically variegated population centres of the Middle East in the seventh century? The Muslim Conquests are often labelled "Arab Conquests," and the Conquerors' cohesive Arab identity is stressed in most medieval Arabic chronicles and modern reconstructions, fuelling conclusions that the Conquests were an ethnic migration.⁴⁷ But the sources' insinuation of the Conquerors' unified Arab identity may be an anachronistic back-projection by later Muslim writers.⁴⁸ The traditional notions of Arab communal identity may thus be yet another misleading oversimplification of ethnicity, and a brief note on the Arabs is in order.

In the light of anthropological theory and ethnogenesis, the history of Arab origins is more properly studied as the history of "Arabness" – i.e., when and where did the *idea* of "Arab" become a marker for a sense of communal consciousness, and what did it mean? Assumptions that "Arab" is synonymous with the race of Arabian nomads whose genealogy/history originates with the domestication of the camel *circa* the second millennium BCE are now outdated (Āqil 1969: 52–60; Carmichael 1967: 6–7);⁴⁹ likewise theories that postulate that Arabs were originally all Bedouin are critiqued (Macdonald 2009a: V 2, 20; Macdonald 2009b: VI 312–313; Retsö 2003: 1–8; Lecker 2010: 153–154), as well as theories that "Arab" is identical to "Arabian" (Macdonald 2009a: 2; Potts 1990: 227; Hoyland 2001: 5, 8, 48; Robin 1991), since this fuses space and race in a rigid construct that ill fits the more fluid essence of ethnic identity. With early Arab identity now released from timeworn stereotypes, the new challenge is to determine which actual groups of Arabians can legitimately be called "Arabs," and scholars adduce manifold proposals (see Webb 2016: 23–24). Scholars have particularly debated two competing theories: did "Arabs" emerge as (1) a patchwork of Bedouin communities in the relatively remote northwest Arabian region of al-Hijāz during the fifth and sixth centuries CE,⁵⁰ or (2) was it the employment of Arabian groups as frontier guards that nurtured Arab ethnogenesis on the Syrian-Arabian frontier in the sixth century CE?⁵¹

We lack conclusive answers, largely because there is an absence of any reference to "Arab community" in Arabian epigraphy or Late Antique literature. Thousands of pre-Islamic inscriptions have been uncovered from the Syrian Desert, central Arabia, and Yemen, but only about a dozen are in a language resembling Arabic,⁵² and there are effectively no texts in which an individual identifies himself as an "Arab."⁵³ The accounts of Arabian society recorded in Late Antique Latin, Greek, and Syriac literature likewise make no indication that Arabian people constituted a *gens* or *ethnos* of "Arabs," as they invariably refer to populations south of the Fertile Crescent as Saracens (*Saraceni*, *Sarakenoi*) in Latin and Greek, or as *Ṭayyāyē* (Syriac and Middle Persian). *Ṭayyāyē* refers to the tribal group of Ṭayyi' which bordered the Sasanian Empire; the origin of "Saracen" is less clear,⁵⁴ but a study of references in writings from Byzantine Palestine indicates that "Saracen" was a generic label for outsider Bedouin, and did not constitute a communal consciousness linking populations across Arabia in one cohesive social group.⁵⁵

To further evaluate questions of Saracen/Arab communal identity, we can turn to ethnogenesis and considerations of Late Antique Arabian social boundaries. It has been proposed that Arabness flourished as the identity of a people stuck in the middle ground between the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires, an area Greek and Syriac writing labels the "Barbarian Plain." Fowden suggests that wider geopolitics was abetted by the sectarian factor of common veneration of St. Sergius (whose martyrion was located in the desert outpost of Sergiopolis/al-Ruṣāfa near the Euphrates) which helped a community of Arabs coalesce in the frontier region (1999: 139). St. Sergius veneration is a key aspect of Late Antique Middle Eastern society, but

militating against the theory of its role in a specific Arab ethnogenesis is the rather stark absence of memory of St. Sergius in Arabic lore and literature. Some Greek writers seemed to think the “Saracens” in the “Barbarian Plain” were flocking to their saint, but those Saracens left scant record of such feelings. Instead, the “Barbarian Plain” was perhaps not so cohesive as the outsider observers imagined it to be: certainly at the northern edge of the Syrian Desert a frontier was strongly felt, but Arabia extended far to the south where different spheres of influence were at play.

The evidence permits an alternative view of pre-Islamic Arabian society as a divided patchwork of many independent communities. In the south, the mountainous and agrarian region was controlled by local elites (*aqyāl*) nominally (and sometimes effectively) controlled by the kingdom of Ḥimyar until the mid-sixth century when it collapsed under the pressures of Ethiopian and then Sasanian invasion, leaving Ṣanaʿā in Sasanian hands at the dawn of Islam, while the countryside devolved into local landholdings and tribal clusters (Robin 2015: 98; Korotayev 1995). In the northern Syrian Desert, two confederacies of Christian Ghassān and polytheistic Lakhm acted as frontier guards for the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, respectively, wielding coercive force against each other and undertaking campaigns to spread influence and control into central Arabia.⁵⁶ Transactionist theory of ethnogenesis indicates that such political boundaries fragment senses of community, and explain why we do not find one sense of pan-Arabian “Arab” or “Saracen” communal identity, since Arabian groups were often in mutual conflict and scattered by divergent interests and allegiances. While Arabians were all generalised as Saracens by the Byzantines, it seems illegitimate to presume on the flip-side that Arabians thought of their own community as “Saracen.”

Pre-Islamic poetry, inscriptions, and contemporary literature suggest the identity of an important group of central Arabian communities was articulated as “Maʿadd.”⁵⁷ The communal cohesion which emerges with the seventh-century conquests seems to have had its germ in this pre-Islamic Maʿadd, whose central Arabian domicile and mostly nomadic and semi-nomadic communities, threatened by pressures from both the north and south, created a transactional boundary in which groups recognised common interests and culture as Maʿadd, nurturing a sense of shared community (and eventually kinship too) between the fourth and seventh centuries CE. Maʿadd excluded the peoples of South Arabia and the more powerful groups to the north, but a considerable number of central Arabians who spoke closely related “Old Arabic” languages articulated a Maʿaddite identity and left such sense of community and shared genealogy in the historical record, particularly in their poetry.

In sum, the radical theories that suggest there was no “Arab” community in pre-Islamic times bear more consideration.⁵⁸ Just as we cannot divide the Late Antique Middle East into definite groups of Persians, Byzantines, and Syriacs, neither can we generalise about pre-Islamic Arabia’s Arabness. The rise of Islam again emerges as a central event that enabled Middle Eastern communities to re-imagine identities.

Identity and social formation in the early Caliphate

Reflecting the absence of reference to “Arab” as a community in pre-Islamic Arabia, there is also scarce indication that Muḥammad referred to his community as “Arabs” or that he pitched the message of Islam to an already cohesive pan-Arabian community.⁵⁹ The Qurʾān makes no statement about the Arab people, and instead articulates an open-ended address to humanity in confessional terms, summoning the words *umma* and *milla* to speak of a righteous community of believers. The Qurʾān engages with the notion of kin groups through the celebrated verse Q 49:13 on the “peoples and tribes of the world” (*shuʿūb* and *qabāʾil*), but the verse concludes

by categorising people according to faith. The identities of Islam's first adherents will benefit from more research, but the Arabian situation seems much akin to the wider Fertile Crescent, where religious communities were composed of a patchwork of different groups. Even during Muḥammad's lifetime, subjects of his fledgling polity were not wholly cohesive: by the evidence of the Qur'ān, Bedouin converts (*a'rāb*) outside of Muḥammad's town of Medina were not granted equal status to the "believers" (*mu'minūn*) resident with Muḥammad.⁶⁰ Processes of confessional-driven ethnogenesis that could amalgamate adherents and induce them to apprehend senses of kinship to cement more robust unity as an ethnos were yet underdeveloped in the early seventh century. The term "Arab Conquests" accordingly seems inaccurate, as its leaders were not managing one ethnic group, and the identities and social standings of its units were diverse.

The emphasis on righteous community in the early Arabic dictionary definitions of ethnic terms such as *milla*, *umma*, and *ma'shar al-muslimin* follows from this postulated concept of early Islamic society. The first converts were not all members of one *kin-sha'b*, and hence new terms for communal organisation reflecting aspirations that the faith system could potentially forge a community offered a useful bridge for early converts to think about what their community meant or could become. But notwithstanding the potentials for confessional unity, the forces of circumstance and ethnogenesis would not lead the early Muslims and their world into one tidy cohesion as their religious system rolled out into the wider Middle East.

The immediate impact of Islam in the Middle East was in fact rather limited. The Conquerors constituted a tiny demographic minority compared to the conquered populations, the notion of "Islam" and what it meant to be a "Muslim" took time to develop,⁶¹ and the conversion of Syrians, Iraqis and other conquered populations was negligible in the seventh century.⁶² But indirect effects of the Conquests had major socio-political and economic ramifications. The Conquerors rapidly eliminated the Byzantine and Sasanian political hegemons, thereby deconstructing the long-subsisting frontier across the Euphrates, and the Conquerors chose to settle in new towns (sing. *miṣr*, pl. *amṣār*) which they constructed for themselves, as opposed to moving into the established population centres, thus redrawing the urban map of the Middle East too.⁶³ Many major cities we know today, Cairo, Baghdad, Mosul, Basra, and others, trace their origins to the settlement of Muslim Conquerors, whilst many Late Antique metropolises either disappeared or shrunk to secondary status.⁶⁴

In terms of ethnogenesis, the settlement of *amṣār* was decisive. The Conquerors possessed great political power, the right to tax and administer, and by virtue of their residence in new towns, Conqueror populations were segregated from the conquered. Almost all the Conquerors hailed from Arabia, spoke similar languages and adhered to new senses of monotheism emanating from the Qur'ān and Muḥammad, and whilst such senses of homeland, languages, and forms of Islamic belief may have differed between Conqueror groups, they were, in the round, distinct from the communal identities of conquered populations. Hence the key ethnogenic factor of consciousness of difference was operative when people were reorganising themselves in the post-conquest Middle East, and the conceptual boundaries of difference self-evidently manifested at the physical boundaries of the *amṣār*. The divide between Conqueror and conquered was moreover amplified by the parallel power differential between *amṣār* and surrounding countryside, abetting the potential of transactional catalysts for ethnogenesis. Unlike groups in the socially fragmented pre-Islamic Arabia, therefore, the militarised Conqueror elites had newfound reason to maintain unity, and newfound awareness of an "other" in political, economic, social, and cultural senses. In such conditions, we are to expect that Conquerors would be prompted to experiment with new notions of community, and this materialises in textual traditions from early Islam.

Conqueror community formation

When evaluating what the Conquerors called themselves, there is some continuity with pre-Islamic communal labels: seventh-century Greek and Syriac records often call the Conquerors “Saracens” and *Ṭayyāyē*, and Arabic texts frequently use “Ma’add,” implying the social cohesion of that central Arabian group after the Conquests.⁶⁵ But texts also evidence the emergence of a new term: *muhājirūn* (Emigrants).⁶⁶ Versions of it appear in Greek and Syriac descriptions of the Conquerors as *Magaritai* and *Mhaggrāyē*,⁶⁷ and indicate an intriguing connection between the movement of peoples out of Arabia, their embracing of a new faith from which the term *muhājirūn* derives,⁶⁸ their settlement into new towns, and the adoption of the new name to articulate their identity. The *muhājirūn* name’s emergence and its delineation of an exclusive social group domiciled in the *amṣār* correspond with typical building blocks of an ethnos, suggesting a process of ethnogenesis was underway. The term *muhājirūn* is also more evident in textual records than the name “Arab” to describe the early Conqueror community,⁶⁹ suggesting genesis of a confessional group, and that the Conquests could better be labelled “Emigrant Conquests” (Hoyland 2015: 102; Webb 2016: 141–145);⁷⁰ at least they underline a marriage of confessional belief and political power to engender a novel community from formerly dispersed Arabian groups.

By the late seventh century, however, the word *muhājirūn* begins to decline in descriptions of the Conquerors, along with a concomitant rise in novel citations of the name “Arab.”⁷¹ It is proposed that after the pace of conquest slowed, and eventually reached a standstill in the late Umayyad period, the Muslim elites were no longer on the move and instead became sedentary in their *amṣār*. As such, third-generation *amṣār* dwellers could no longer sustain an “Emigrant” identity, and herein their attempts to maintain elite status and communal cohesion in the new demographic landscape of a settled Caliphate seem to have engendered a new form of identity to demarcate the scion of the Caliphate’s elite – herein the process of *Arab* ethnogenesis took tangible form. If this is correct, then the rise of Islam and the sweep of the next three generations of social change constituted the catalyst for the eventual emergence of Arab communities as the identity of Islam’s elite (Webb 2016: 126–156).

What is clear, at least, is that the organisation of the Caliphate bestowed vitality to confessional factors in defining the boundaries of social groups. The early Muslims employed the label *umma* to describe their community, constructing the boundaries of “us” around co-confessionals. The faith-based definitions of the terms *qawm*, *ma’shar*, and *ahl* noted above dovetail with impressions that some Muslims sought to delineate their community not around kinship and ethnos, but around monotheistic belief. In the first generation or two of Islam, the question of what that proprietary belief actually meant remains the subject of current debate: there is an argument that distinctions between Muslim and Christian were not so rigid as they would later become, and hence we could expect that communal boundaries would be unclear and the parameters of Conqueror community open to most monotheists.⁷² Such proposals of an early “ecumenical Islam” suggest early post-conquest society was primarily monotheist-defined and open to a wide array of members, irrespective of ethnic traits such as kinship, domicile, or other heritage.

Howsoever open-ended the parameters of nascent Conqueror society may have been, it is rather clear that through the course of the seventh century, the Conquerors were enabled to articulate new and broader notions of communal identity than any pre-Islamic Arabian groups had ever expressed. The impetus to organise early post-conquest society on such confessional terms may reflect forces operating in Late Antiquity discussed above, but it was also (perhaps crucially) enhanced by political factors. The Caliphate’s elite hailed from various backgrounds,

but they shared a common interest in ring-fencing their identity to preserve their status. When seeking shared “cultural stuff” to adhere their new identity, faith and language were two of the most readily identifiable commonalities given their otherwise diverse origins and cultures, and hence Muslim creed and Arabic language (also given status via the Qurʾān) offered the most mobilisable means for the militarised elite to construct a robust and proprietary sense of community to distinguish themselves from the conquered populace. The coincidence of faith and power enabled Conqueror elites to establish social cohesion by redefining the contours of communal boundaries.

The increasing potency of faith to articulate communal boundaries also manifests amongst other post-conquest populations. The emergence of self-styled Nestorians in Iraq coincides with the reorganisation of Iraqi demographics following the settlement of the *amṣār* and the redrawing of political boundaries after the fall of the Sasanians (Brock 1996), and likewise, the articulation of West Syrian identity in more ethnic terms as a kin community is clearest in Islamic-era texts (Romeny et al. 2010). In both cases, it seems that churches were empowered to re-imagine their congregations in an ethnic guise: those who attended a common church expressed feelings of belonging to one kin. But research on faith and ethnogenesis in the post-conquest Middle East is ongoing – alternative views express reservations as to whether confessional boundary hardening closely followed the Islamic Conquests,⁷³ and issues of conversion are particularly intriguing as individual Christians and Jews seem to have converted and reverted, clouding the confessional map (Simonsohn 2015).⁷⁴ There is, however, limited evidence of Conquerors reverting, which bolsters the notion that Conqueror elite status coupled with its religious affiliation was a valuable asset, and gave fledgling Muslim identity a tangible value. That asset value prompted Muslims to conceptualise faith as a primary means to categorise people, which we saw reflected in the Arabic “ethnic” terminology, and such religious “othering” to delineate Muslim society could then have prompted Christians to respond in turn, driving their consciousness of community into more confessional directions too, spawning new identities and ethnic groups in the process. Likewise, Boyarin proposes that the contours of Jewish identity took new forms via the changes of Late Antiquity and early Islam, offering another example of the ways in which social organisation in the Caliphate influenced all faith communities in the Middle East (1999, 2004).

Notwithstanding the intriguing evidence considered so far, it is nonetheless imprudent to conclude that faith acquired hegemonic power to create communities in the first 150 years of Islam. Ethnogenesis is a slow and bifurcated process, and while the conditions of the early Caliphate inaugurated significant impetus to turn shared faith into “imagined communities,”⁷⁵ many continuities from pre-Islamic social organisation remained, and the Caliphate’s composition also introduced other catalysts for fragmentation and alternative strategies for identity formation across the Middle East.

Continuities and fragmentation

In terms of Late Antique continuities, the small size of the Conqueror armies necessitated a delicate balance of power in the post-conquest Caliphate. The early Muslims were spread too thinly to supplant all administrative and landholding structures, and accordingly, local elites, in particular agricultural landholders and tax collectors, retained pre-conquest position and status. Furthermore, given that the Byzantine and Sasanian empires had not cemented their respective imperial identities with their subjects, their replacement by the new Caliphate did not entail a wholesale transformation of indigenous identities. From the perspective of conquered locales, the overlords changed from Byzantine and Sasanian elites to Muslim *muhājirūn*, but local

communities had limited interaction with *amṣār* dwellers, and the Conquerors little interfered with indigenous languages, religious practice, legal codes, and social structures. Northern Iraq continued to be managed by *shahārija* (sing. *shahrīj*), notables appointed in the late Sasanian Empire to manage agricultural estates, and some *shahārija* survived into the ninth century (Robinson 2006: 90–105). In Iran and southern Iraq, similar Sasanian-era landed gentry, called *dahāqīn* (sing. *dihqān*), managed the land at least into the eighth century (Morony 1984: 187–190, 204). Villages thus kept pre-Islamic orientations in place, and Muslim Arabic writers refer to Iraqi provincials as *nabaṭ*, a term without confessional connotations, but instead a label for the culturally Iraqi agriculturalists as opposed to the Arabian militarised elite of the *amṣār*.⁷⁶

Umayyad-era management of the Egyptian countryside via Byzantine-era elites seems to follow the Iraqi pattern (Sijpesteijn 2013); elsewhere, local autonomy was even more pronounced. North African Berber kingdoms were only partially brought within the Caliphate's control, but here too there was a role for faith in developing Islamic-era Berber identity. North African communities converted to Islam, but they soon embraced a form of Khārijism, opposed to the doctrine of the Caliphate. Berber groups were thus able to articulate autonomy through their ethnic and regional particularism that had developed in Late Antiquity, and via a proprietary and defiant novel form of faith that ring-fenced their identity vis-à-vis Muslim rulers (Savage 1997; Brett and Fentress 1997: 120–154).

Whilst Muslim rulers across the Caliphate were engaged in unifying themselves within the *amṣār*, it nonetheless remains difficult to speak of Conquerors as one cohesive community since the processes of Arab ethnogenesis and the development of “orthodox Islam” were obstructed by new forms of communal and factional organisation enhanced via competition over the spoils of conquest. The Caliphate was slow in establishing universal and legitimate authority,⁷⁷ and hence the pan-Muslim/Arab identity aligned with the interests of the Caliphs was challenged by regional identities of the Conquerors themselves. In Arabic literature, many of the inter-Muslim wars in the first 150 years of Islam are described in stark regionalist terminology – particularly as a conflict between Iraqis (*ahl al-ʿIrāq*) and Syrians (*ahl al-Shām*). These terms do not refer to the indigenous populations, but rather the Muslim elites who developed strong attachments to their land of settlement and manifested solidarity with their immediate neighbours to construct regional power blocs. The Umayyads were based in Syria, and Iraqi elites were resentful, resulting in major conflicts (*fitna*). Whilst early Muslims could thus imagine unity as *muhājirūn* or as “Arabs,” they also had ample opportunity to identify with their domicile (as Byzantine and Sasanian landed elites had done in Late Antiquity), and by the evidence of text, this was a popular and divisive option.⁷⁸

Equally divisive was a form of factionalism expressed in tribalist terms. We noted the importance of Maʿadd as a community in pre-Islamic Arabia and the continuation of Maʿaddite identity as a means to identify Conqueror elites in early Islam, but not all of the Conquerors hailed from Maʿaddite groups, the sense of Maʿaddite kinship itself was not watertight, and during the organisation of the Caliphate, rival factions formed.⁷⁹ The factions drew their boundaries around the rallying cry of kinship, illustrating the conceptual attractions of tribal-based alliance amongst the Conquerors. While the idea of tribal solidarity seems a continuity of pre-Islamic Arabian social organisation, the Muslim-era alliances were not simply replications of pre-Islamic communal boundaries, as the genealogical boundaries of the factions were quite novel and fluid. The group Quḍāʾa changed its claimed blood-relations to align better with political expediency in the political changes between the early and later Umayyad dynasty,⁸⁰ the kin-group Maʿadd devolved into permutations known variously as Nizār/Muḍar/Rabīʾa, alongside a more antagonistic offshoot of Qays, and an entirely new faction of al-Yamāniya emerged to unite formerly disparate non-Maʿaddite groups.⁸¹ Like other social groups discussed here, these factions did

not enjoy complete solidarity, but they were effective, and kin-group rivalries and violence known as *ʿaṣabiyya* were palpable in the Umayyad and early ʿAbbāsid periods. Kin-*ʿaṣabiyya* had some regional aspects (al-Yamāniya may have first formed around regional elites in Syria), but the value of kin-*ʿaṣabiyya* as a social asset was its pan-regional capacity to rally allies across the Caliphate's widespread military bases, and the switching alliances of such groups was a direct cause for the Umayyad downfall.⁸² An *amṣār* dweller at the dawn of the eighth century could accordingly identify as a member of his particular town, his wider region, his immediate clan, his wider kin-group *ʿaṣabiyya*, or as an "Arab" most inclusively – and we can imagine that he would opt for any and all of the above, whenever most expedient.

Caliphate, assimilation, Persians, and conclusions

As is the case of any societal development over time, the continuities from Late Antiquity gradually faded as new forms of social organisation wrought by the growing power of the Caliphate ascended, and the resultant meld of various trends produced new and hybrid identities which eighth-century populations could embrace. The role of the Caliphate in forging such new senses of identity was material – the consolidation of the state under ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 685–705) witnessed significant Arabisation, changing the Caliphate's administrative language to Arabic and promoting Arabic script as a public text.⁸³ ʿAbd al-Malik's initiatives may also have consolidated confessional identities to define a more closed-ended notion of Islam as very distinct from Christian and Jewish forms of monotheism (Donner 2010: 206–216). The momentum of these dual initiatives benefited from ʿAbd al-Malik's administrative consolidation and drive to impose Caliphal control and ideology across the empire, and the scope for changes in the composition of society is manifest. We could accordingly expect that the second half of the Umayyad period inaugurated major opportunities for change in the options available to individuals for determining their identities, and to this point, it is intriguing that the emergence of the name "Arab" as a form of self-identity in Arabic poetry and other records dates to this period (Webb 2016: 85–88, 144–151). Given the likely clearer distinction between "Muslim" and "Christian" in the wake of ʿAbd al-Malik,⁸⁴ we can therefore also begin speaking at the dawn of the eighth century about the first earnest attempts and the first practical emergence of a broad and closed-ended notion of Arab/Muslim community as equivalent to the descendants of Arabian Conquerors, now articulated as excluding all other subjects of the Caliphate.

Beyond Arab ethnogenesis, the effects of Marwānid Caliphate also trickled into regional locales. Post-ʿAbd al-Malik, local elites would have found themselves speaking more Arabic, interacting with more Conqueror functionaries, and encountering more coherent communities of Muslims. In these situations, the pre-Islamic elites would find advantages in converting and embracing more Arabic "cultural stuff" traits to curry favour with the administration, and the decline of the Sasanian military elite (*asāwira*) in Iraq as noted by Morony appears related to the process of assimilation (1984). In tandem, when the *amṣār* settlers ceased active campaigning, also in the late Umayyad era, their attention would be drawn to increased control over their locales, fostering both stronger regional particularism and a more pronounced Muslim presence in the local elite. Evidence suggests such hybrid Conqueror/assimilating local elite identities emerged in each of the Caliphate's regions.⁸⁵

Yet another avenue to explore the wrinkles of community and identity in the post-conquest Middle East investigates the role of legal practices. Law underpins the organisation of communities, and hence legal codes proffer insight into the societies that choose to be bound by them. Furthermore, the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faiths each articulated complex legal

frameworks to govern the lives of their adherents, reinforcing the role of law in shaping communal boundaries.⁸⁶ As specific examples, papyri from Egypt reveal an array of legal practices as recorded by litigants and court officials: pre-Islamic criminal law seems to have persisted in some regions into the eighth century, whereas laws influenced by Muslim jurisprudence are also referenced, though not always enforced (Reinfandt 2010). The results tend to mirror the local political and landholding patterns: local legal traditions remained strong in the Umayyad era, though the state continuously sought to assert a standardised Caliphal code, and we behold a permanent negotiation between local and Caliphal communal/jurisprudential organisation (Tillier 2013: 198–204). Simultaneously, clerical groups developed rulings to harden the boundaries between churches within regions, and hence populations again navigated a plurality of legal codes, each carrying potent connotations of political, confessional, and social identities.⁸⁷

The complexities of law and social identity reveal yet again the shortcomings of conceptualising social groups in the early Caliphate in generalised terms of “Muslim vs. Christian” or “centre vs. periphery.” Clerics and caliphs clearly hoped to shore up the boundaries of their constituencies, but the efforts they expended to do so disclose the extent of the difficulties they faced in practice. The writers of our sources were predominantly the religious scholars – ḥadīth narrators, priests, and rabbis – they had clear notions of “orthodoxy” and sectarian boundaries, and their literature paints a tidy picture for us to categorise populations, but those populations actually enjoyed a wealth of options when considering how to identify themselves. To speak of “Muslim-Christian relations” or “Jewish identity” in the early Caliphate thus risks imposing overly cohesive categories onto history,⁸⁸ and we are amply warned by a poem composed by Caliph al-Walīd ibn Yazīd (r. 125–126/743–744): as caliph, he stood at the apex of Muslim-Arab identity, but those rigid boundaries he was officially supposed to uphold seem, by his own admission, to have been rather irksome when he once saw a pretty girl leaving a church:

Your heart, oh Walīd, has fallen sick –
 Love-sick, prey to a handsome one:
 Loving a supple, bright-toothed beauty
 Appearing to us from the Church on Feast Day.
 There I gazed upon her, wide-eyed,
 Until I saw her kiss the wood –
 The wood of the cross. Woe is me!
 Who has seen a cross so worshiped?
 I asked God that I may be in its place!
 And be for the Hellfire, kindling.

(al-Walīd b. Yazīd 1998: 33–34,
 author’s translation)

The broader ramifications of al-Walīd b. Yazīd following his heart are articulated in another key aspect of ethnogenesis theory: the phenomenon of assimilation. In the right circumstances, people come together, and eighth-century Middle Eastern society is a prime example. The *amṣār* initially were inhabited by Conquerors and drew remarkably clear transactional boundaries, but the political success of the Caliphate and the attendant economic growth of the *amṣār* turned them into attractive foci of opportunity for conquered populations, who, from the mid-/late seventh century onwards, began migrating into the new towns. The migrants were labelled *mawālī* (sing. *mawlā*), indicating “client” status to the Conquer kin-groups, and they became a major social group in Arabic literary descriptions of community.⁸⁹ Not all *mawālī* necessarily converted to Islam (Crone 1980: 49 n. 358), but by the eighth century many Iraqi

mawālī were Muslim, and they all needed to speak Arabic to survive in the *amṣār*. *Mawālī* influx and Arab ethnogenesis thus met in a shared transactional environment with declining cultural difference between the groups – herein assimilation would begin creating cosmopolitan urban identities, neither wholly Arab nor non-Arab, and these would flower from the third/ninth century onwards as the most ready means to conceptualise medieval Middle Eastern social organisation.

In the context of assimilation, we close this chapter with a consideration of Persian ethnicity. Traditional histories have stressed the ethnic cohesion of Iranians as “Persians” from the pre-Islamic period onwards, but, akin to problematic generalisations about Arab and other Middle Eastern identities, “Persian” may also unduly homogenise the identity of Iran in the early Caliphate. Persian-language literature before the tenth century is scarce (and non-existent in the first centuries of the Caliphate), and Arabic texts are somewhat ambivalent about Persian-ness. Texts refer to people as *a’ājim* and/or *’ajam*: but the meanings are obscure – etymologically, both words are related to the idea of incomprehensible sound, or silence, and when Arabic writers marshalled the words, they intended peoples possessing *’ujma*, a confused/unclear way of speaking. This was usually intended to contrast the clear eloquence of Arabic speakers, and *a’ājim* in particular could refer to any conquered populations of the Caliphate, whereas *’ajam* adopted more specific connotations of “Persian ethnos” by the eighth or ninth century at the latest. The temporal congruence of the assimilation of early ‘Abbāsīd-era Iraq seems connected to the emergence of an ethnic term for “Persian” *qua* *’ajam* and Arabic literature’s familiar binary discussions of Arabs vs. Persian. The indication would then be that senses of Persian ethnic identity took a new form in the assimilated and Muslim world order of the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate, fundamentally changing what it meant to be Persian as a result of the establishment of Islam.⁹⁰ “Persian” identity as known from our source literature would then primarily exist in an Arabised guise: memories of Iran’s pre-Islamic past were filtered through processes of Arabic-Muslim memorialisation, and emerged over the course of several centuries as new ingredients for a whole new kind of Persian identity.

The Conquests and subsequent reorganisation of the Middle East thus appear as potent catalysts for varied ethnic developments, and while many modern notions of Middle Eastern identity – Arab and Persian, Muslim and Syriac Christian, amongst others – can trace their roots to post-conquest communal consciousness, the pathways to define groups were bifurcated and manifold. Identities were changing as the value of different forms of social organisation evolved in response to political, economic and doctrinal factors. An Iraqi peasant in 640 may have little noticed the change in regime far above his rank in the social ladder, though by 700 his landlord may have converted to Islam and the peasant may have begun looking to the *amṣār* for better economic opportunities, opening up a world of a new faith, or a retrenchment of his own confession in response to Muslims around him. Likewise a Conqueror in 640 may have thought of himself as a “Ma’addite” or “Emigrant,” but in 700 he may have changed the horizons of his community to “Arab” or “Muslim.” One senses that if we were able to ask any individual from the Early Caliphate who he thought he was, we would be confronted with a long pause as he endeavoured to gauge what sort of answer we were after.

Notes

- 1 Theories and methodologies employed to study social groups are outlined in the next section.
- 2 Nora’s seminal work on French national memory and identity (Nora 1996–1998) is currently challenged by new efforts to refine its analytical scope: see Astrid Erlil (2011) and Gavriel D. Rosenfeld (2009).

- 3 Anthropological theory flows deeper than the level of “ethnicity”: theorists discuss “registers of identity,” noting that people present themselves and interact with neighbours in manifold ways, and accordingly each identity contains situational, performative, and constructive elements (Baumann and Gingrich 2004). Identity and Cultural Studies theory also opens methodological possibilities to consider the effects of slavery, employment, and gender (amongst other categories) on early Muslim society. This chapter’s focus will be ethnicity in the broad sense, given the pressing importance of reviewing stereotypes of “Arab,” “Persian,” and others that have exerted much influence on Islamic historiography to date.
- 4 Some call the race/ethnicity distinction merely semantic (see Jenkins 2008: 23–24), but Boas explains the difference as a paradigmatic contrast of “race and biology” vs. “ethnicity and culture” (1940).
- 5 Weber’s theory did not become widespread until after the Second World War. His initial champions were anthropologists, whose fieldwork tested his theory (see Vermeulen and Govers 1997; Banton 2007; and Jenkins 2008); historians and other sociologists also embraced the subjective notion of community (see Hobsbawm 1990; Smith 1986; Anderson 1991).
- 6 Reinhard Wenskus (1961) and the Vienna School initiated the diachronic historical approach to ethnogenesis, followed by Patrick Geary (2003; Walter Pohl and Helmut Reimitz 1998). The Vienna School has critics – they are evaluated by Bas ter Haar Romeny 2012: 185–194).
- 7 Instrumentalism is traced to Fredrik Barth (1969) and constructivism to Anderson (1991) and Hobsbawm (1990). There seems to be no “right” approach, and modern anthropologists marshal a mixture of the two (Vermeulen and Govers 1997: 19–22; Jenkins 2008).
- 8 On the importance of common language in ethnogenesis see Kramsch (1998: 70–72); but theorists stress that language should not be over-emphasised: shared language does not drive ethnogenesis alone – other social factors are equally, if not more, important (see Duranti and Goodwin 1992; Bucholtz and Hall 2012).
- 9 Cynthia Enloe (1980: 361) and Jenkins (2008: 111–127) ascribe religion a determinative role in ethnic formation, especially for societies pre-dating Europe’s secular nation states (which have received disproportionate attention in studies on identity).
- 10 For the division of ethnogenesis into “formation” and then “maintenance and renewal” stages, see Romeny et al. (2010: 9).
- 11 Ethnicity resembles history in its mediation between reality and fiction. As Ricoeur notes, history can be reinterpreted, but the underlying real events limit the realms of creativity in ways fiction writers do not experience (1988: III 154). Likewise ethnicity is an intellectual construct which can be reconceptualised only within boundaries imposed by social realities.
- 12 The tenacity of old identities and their interaction with changing power relations are explored in the key studies of Bain Attwood (1989) and Terrance Ranger (1993).
- 13 Weber (1996) privileges politics and economy, but also entertained other factors (see Raum 1995).
- 14 *Al-Ayn*’s extant form may date to the early ninth century; for discussion of its date and authorship see Gregor Schoeler (2006: 142–163).
- 15 See the definition of *gens* and *natio* by Isidore (2006: 192) and Lewis and Short (1894: 808, 1189). *Gens* continued to be translated as “nation” or “race” in twentieth-century European scholarship, though Walter Pohl argues to orient its meaning to the more neutral “people” in order to dissociate *gens* from tribal paradigms (2012: 10–13); *gens* does not connote a fixed kinship hierarchy which is the hallmark of tribe, rather it simply connotes common descent.
- 16 For the role of Genesis 10 in other Late Antique/early medieval Latin traditions, see Gregory of Tours (1974: I 4–7) and Bede (2008: 215–227).
- 17 Consider also the “nomadic ethnos,” i.e., Bedouin peoples in Syria (Le Bas, Waddington, and Poucart 1847–1870: 2203). Greek also has *gened*, similar in connotation to the Latin *gens*, used for pedigree and royal lines, its use to define nations (e.g., Aeschylus 2009 *Persians*: 80, 516, 912, 1013) was “rare in prose” (Liddell and Scott 1925: I 342).
- 18 See discussions of barbarism and *éthni* by Erich Gruen (2011).
- 19 *Éthni* was the usual translation for the Hebrew *Gōyīm*, “Gentile nations” – otherness constructed as a function of different faith.
- 20 In Late Antiquity, *gentes* also connoted the opposite to “Romans,” i.e., “foreigners,” and, in ecclesiastical writing, pagan nations, heathens – hence “gentiles” (Lactantius 2004: II 13; Ps. 2:1). This usage was apparently rare (Lewis and Short 1894: 809), but *gens* seems to have been partially sectarianised in Late Antiquity in step with the increasingly sectarian connotation of *éthnos*.

- 21 Ironically, the South Arabian Semitic languages used *sha'b* to mean “purely territorial entities” (Robin 2015: 98).
- 22 For example, the discussions of *qawm* are influenced by its unusually gender-specific citation in Q 49:11 (al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad 1980: V 231; Ibn Durayd 1987–1988: II 977); and *umma* is also in part defined via its Qur'ānic citations (al-Azharī 2004: XI 504–506; Ibn Durayd 1987–1988 I 60).
- 23 For apocalyptic and community, see Collins (1998) and Cook (2002).
- 24 *Sha'b*, the closest to “race,” was not derived from fatherhood/motherhood, but rather ‘splitting’ – its definition followed the idea from Genesis that the world’s populations split into different peoples. Only one dictionary expressly defined *sha'b* via “the father of the tribes from whom they descended” (al-Azharī 2004: I 394).
- 25 See al-Mas'ūdī (1966–1979) for a particularly detailed account of world peoples and their ancestry; for the highly contested question of the “father of the Arabs,” see Webb (2016: 188–197, 205–222).
- 26 Ibn Fāris is clear that *umma* means “group and religion” (2002: I 21, see also I 27). The relationship between Arabic *umma* and Syriac *umthā* “race or nation of people” (Payne Smith 1903: 6) could be explored.
- 27 Al-Azharī (2004: I 394) is explicit that non-Arabs (*ʿajam*) are organised into *shu'ūb*, whereas Arabs have “tribes” (*qabā'il*). Other Arabic writers followed suit, though other peoples were stereotyped as tribal too – particularly Kurds and Berbers (see, e.g., al-Tanūkhī 1995: I 176; al-Mas'ūdī 1966–1979: §1104–1118).
- 28 For the term and discourses in relation to modern tribal genealogy, see Andrew Shryock (1997).
- 29 al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad 1980: IV 245–246, 487; Ibn Durayd 1987–1988: I 582; al-Azharī 2004: V 457.
- 30 For the poem, see al-Anbārī (2003: I 513). For the definitions, see al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad (1980: II 136), Ibn Durayd (1987–1988: II 772), and Ibn Fāris (2002: IV 441–442).
- 31 Hugh Kennedy suggests that Ibn al-Kalbī generated his genealogical models on a “must have been” basis (1997; see also Robinson 2003: 41; Szombathy 2002; Khalidi 1994: 50). Zoltán Szombathy pursues the 'Abbāsīd “invention” of Arab genealogy (1999). The varied 'Abbāsīd-era attempts to identify the ‘first Arab,’ also suggest the neat genealogies of later writers did not emerge from ancient Arab lore, but from 'Abbāsīd discourses (Webb 2016: 205–222). For another critique of Orientalist paradigms associating Arabness with tribalism, see al-Azmeh (2014: 127–130) and Pohl (2012: 10–14).
- 32 For example, Sabaic inscriptions from South Arabia use *s'rt* (c.f. Ar. *ashīra*) for ‘tribes’, whereas words related to *ḥayy* and *qabila* are not attested (Beeston et al. 1982: 21; Biella 2004: 388), thus demonstrating the varied lexicon used by different Arabian peoples to describe tribal groupings.
- 33 The contrast of “Arab”/tribal with “Persian”/regional social organisation in Muslim discourses is discussed by Roy Mottahedeh (1976; see also Szombathy 1999).
- 34 Andre Gingrich discusses the importance of tribalism and its positive connotations with freedom and autonomy in medieval thought (2012: 36–38); it should be noted, however, that negative aspects of tribalism as a kind of primitivism were expressed in later ninth- and tenth-century Arabic (Webb 2016: 319–332; see also Leder and Streck 2005).
- 35 For European ethnogenesis, see Geary (2003).
- 36 Religious policy, the enforcement of orthodoxy, and the important role of Justinian are introduced by Pauline Allen (2000).
- 37 Syncretism is anecdotally reported in various guises in the Late Antique Middle East: see the sharing of ritual sites at Mamre (Sozomen 1890: II 4) and at Sergiopolis (Fowden 1999: 97).
- 38 Important finds of Greco-Arabic are revealed by Ahmad Al-Jallad (2017).
- 39 Efforts to assert the Christian commonwealth into the Middle East are evidenced since the first Christian emperor, Constantine (Fowden 2006: 389).
- 40 The Ethiopic–South Arabian wars are much discussed: for a recent survey, see Bowersock (2013).
- 41 Zoroastrian imagery features prominently on Sasanian coinage and rock-hewn reliefs commemorating monarchs (e.g., Naqsh-e Rostam near Persepolis), but Daryaee relates the difficulties priests and monarchs faced in establishing a sense of Zoroastrian orthodoxy around which a stable confessional identity could be formed (2010: 71–72, 84–86). Moreover, orthodox Zoroastrianism was for the elite, and may have had more tenuous relations with the Empire’s subjects (Daryaee 2010: 92–93).
- 42 Payne makes this argument for Sasanian Iraq in particular (2012: 220).
- 43 The “agnatic families,” the continued hegemony of the Arsacids in the Sasanian East, and a more de-centralised notion of Sasanian kingship as “confederacy” is set forth by Parvaneh Pourshariati (2008: 27–30, 37–47).

- 44 The absence of a defined pre-Islamic “Persian-ness” to unite peoples of the Iranian Plateau is the thesis of Sarah Savant (2013).
- 45 The pronounced autonomy of the Afrighids in Khwarazm (Bosworth 1982: I 743–745) and the Dabuyids in Tabaristan are cases in point (Melville 2000). Daryaei also discusses the role of class distinctions with the Sasanian realm (2010: 42–50).
- 46 For Berbers and the Islamic era, see Elizabeth Savage (1997) and Brett and Fentress (1997: 81–94).
- 47 Reading Islam as an “Arab movement” began in Enlightenment discourses, especially with Edward Gibbon (1776–1789: IX 192–314). Gibbon accorded substantial role to the “Arab” Conquerors’ religious motivation. The secularisation of interpretations to view Islam’s rise as a racial/national movement of “Arabs” became the dominant paradigm by the mid-nineteenth century, corresponding to the rise of secular nationalism in Europe (see Renan 1857; de Goeje 1900; Becker 1913; and later iterations by Crone and Cook 1977; Hoyland 2015).
- 48 The retrospective Arabisation of the past is discussed by Robert Hoyland (2001: 241–244; 2015: 56–60; Webb 2016: 249–269).
- 49 See Greg Fisher for critique of the methodology (2011b: 248–249). Even the Palmyrene and Nabataean trading kingdoms in Syria and Jordan, respectively, long classified as “Arab,” are now moving out of scholarly opinions about the Arab ethnoses.
- 50 The proponents of the “Empty Hijāz” theory are discussed by James Montgomery (2006). Montgomery is critical of the theory; for further critique, see Webb (2016: 37–42).
- 51 The proponents of the frontier theory are Robert Hoyland (2009) and Greg Fisher (2011a). For critical appraisal of the theory, see Webb (2016: 30, 78–80, 111–115).
- 52 For a summary of epigraphic evidence for “Old Arabic,” see Michael Macdonald (2008). Subsequent work refined the corpus somewhat, see Webb (2016: 60–66); for new and important finds of Greco-Arabic, see Al-Jallad (2017).
- 53 The epitaph of a “King of the Arabs” at al-Namāra in southern Syria is a notable exception, but linking the expression to a sense of Arab communal identity seems incorrect (see Retsö 2003: 471, 485; Hoyland 2015: 26; Webb 2016: 75–76).
- 54 For the origins of “Saracen” see Macdonald (2009a: 20–21; Ward 2008).
- 55 See the detailed analysis of Saracen-ness as a social label by Rachel Stroumsa (2008).
- 56 Ghassān (also called Jafnids in modern writing) and Lakhm (Nasrids) are much researched: see Fisher (2011a) and Genequand and Robin (2015).
- 57 Pre-Islamic Ma’addite identity is discussed by Zwettler (2000) and Webb (2016: 70–85).
- 58 The emergence of Arabness as a form of communal consciousness only in the Muslim-era was first postulated by D.H. Müller (1896: II 344–359). The theory was immediately rejected by Theodor Nöldeke (1899: I 272–275), but recent scholarship cast renewed doubt on the notion of “pre-Islamic Arabs” as an actual community or ethnoses (Donner 2010: 217–220; Millar 2013: 154–158). Pre-Islamic and Islamic-era evidence is surveyed afresh by Webb, arguing that consciousness of an expressly Arab community is a Muslim-era phenomenon (2016: 23–156).
- 59 Traditional scholarship assumed the Qur’ān was addressed to Arabs. Close study of the Qur’ān’s ethnic Arabness reveals that tradition rests on problematic assumptions (Bashear 1997; Webb 2016: 115–126).
- 60 Khalil Aṭṭamīna discusses the second-class status of *a’rāb* Bedouin (1987); the Qur’anic citations of *a’rāb* and their attendant social status are discussed by Sara Binay (2006: 55–59, 78–89).
- 61 The development of Islam into a fixed system of belief is the subject of academic debate concerning theology, but it impinges on notions of community, since it would be difficult to speak of “Muslims” as a distinct people before the faith of “Islam” had a fairly standardised articulation.
- 62 Most studies on conversion suggest a slow rate (see: Bulliet 1979; Dennet 1950; Levzion 1979). Iraq may have had the fastest uptake, but Morony dates widespread conversion only to the later seventh century (1984: 178 n. 55, 199, 431). Bulliet dates it to the mid-eighth century (1979: 87).
- 63 Donald Whitcomb refers to the construction of the *amṣār* as a “intentional reconstitution of the social organization of the conquered lands” (1994: 12).
- 64 The diminished importance of Alexandria, Nineveh and al-Ḥīra in favour of Fuṣṭāṭ (Cairo), Mosul, and Kufa are examples; Syrian cities of Jerusalem and Damascus, however, obviously retained their importance, though new Syrian *amṣār* such as al-Ramla and Ayla grew into important Umayyad-era centres too.
- 65 For Greek and Syriac sources, see Hoyland (1997); for Ma’add in the early Islamic period, see Webb (2016: 86–96) and Webb (forthcoming).
- 66 Demonstrated by Patricia Crone (1994a) and Ilkka Lindstedt (2015).

- 67 For bibliography of studies of these terms in Syriac and Greek, see Webb (2016: 170 n. 119).
- 68 *Hijra* (emigration) as an exhortation to Muslims is invoked in the Qur'ān (Q 2:218, 4:89, 8:74, 16:41, 22:58; see also Crone 1994a; Athamina 1987).
- 69 Bashear dates the first cohesive records of Muslims as "Arabs" to the eighth century (1997); see Webb for a re-evaluation of the significance of Bashear's thesis (2016: 150–151).
- 70 The legacy of the confessional-tinged name *muhājirūn* again underlines the confessional lens grafted onto the "ethnic" terms in Arabic, such as *umma* and *ma'shar* considered above.
- 71 For survey of citations of "Arab" in poetry and prose, see Webb (2016: 85–88, 144–151).
- 72 The notion of nascent "ecumenical Islam" derives from Donner (2010: 56–92, 217–220; see also Borrut and Donner 2016).
- 73 Against the sectarian theories of Morony, see Tannous (2010: 431–480).
- 74 For Syriac conversion issues, see Tannous (2010: 430–451).
- 75 To borrow Benedict Anderson's apt description of the nature of the cohesion between members of broad-based social groups (1991). For further theoretical discussion of the nexus of faith and nationhood, see also Smith (2003).
- 76 See discussion and references to *nabaṭ al-'iraq* by T. Fahd (1960–2007).
- 77 The efforts to legitimise the Caliphate as a form of rule are widely studied: see, for example, discussions by Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds (1986) and Andrew Marsham (2009).
- 78 The question of regionalism is under-studied: an important contribution is John Haldon and Hugh Kennedy (2012).
- 79 For the status of Ma'add as a communal identity in early Islam, see Webb (forthcoming).
- 80 For lengthy discussion of Qudā'a and its contested genealogy, see Kister (1960–2007: V 315–218) and Crone (1994b: 44–49).
- 81 Pre-Islamic records do not evidence a budding "Yemeni" identity, even in inscriptions from pre-Islamic South Arabia, where a land, "YMNT," is only a small part of South Arabia. This author therefore believes the notion of Yemeni identity to be a Muslim-era phenomenon; Christian Robin sets out the inscriptional evidence and interpretations (2013).
- 82 The tribal factions have been called "political parties" (Shaban 1971). The thesis was challenged by Crone (1994b). The factionalism does appear to have increased substantially by the end of the Umayyad dynasty – see al-Dīnawārī (2001: 514) for revealing reports on the role of factions in the Umayyad downfall.
- 83 Chase Robinson describes the reforms and their effects (2005: 51–80, 105–28; see also Hoyland 2006).
- 84 The central thesis of Donner (2010).
- 85 Mathieu Tillier discusses the case of Egypt and Iraq (2013) and Robinson the Jazīra of northern Iraq/Syria (2006); Sijpesteijn gives the most detailed account of the implementation and effects of legal frameworks in Egypt in early Islam (2013).
- 86 For an introduction and bibliography on law and identity in early Islam, see Uriel Simonsohn (2013).
- 87 The role of confessional legal rulings in the ring-fencing of identities is discussed by M.J. Kister (1989), Morony (1984: 454–458), and Leor Halevi (2007).
- 88 Recent discussions of religious identities are collected by Borrut and Donner (2016) and Arietta Papaconstantinou, Neil McLynn, and Daniel Schwartz (2015).
- 89 The *mawālī* are the subject of many studies. Prominent contributions include those by Milka Levy-Rubin (2011), Monique Bernards and John Nawas (2005), and Patricia Crone (1980). In early literature, the *mawālī* were even classified as a *sha'b* (ethnic group) to themselves (see al-Khalīl 1980: I 263).
- 90 Ahmad Ashraf provides detailed discussion and full bibliography for Iranian identity studies from pre-Islam through the Islamic period (1982: XIII 501–504, 507–522); critiques of traditional discourses are developed by Savant (2013); Zia-Ebrahimi (2016) further problematises the supposed "Arab/Persian" dichotomy in pre-modern social thought.

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